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ABSTRACT

Despite the importance of children's literature written by and about people of color, little multiethnic literature is available. However, the situation has improved somewhat. In recent years there has been a greater focus in African-American literature upon folk tales, family stories, family histories, and biographies. Still, books about the Hispanic, Asian, or Native American experience mostly have tended to be written about, not by, members of those groups. An examination of stories from trade books and basal reading programs presented on the third-grade level found no non-white main characters. No other ethnic groups were represented. A similar scarcity of multicultural content was found in former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett's suggested reading list and Jim Trelease's 1989 reading list. Readers from commercial publishers reflected greater diversity. The examination of multiethnic literature raises such questions as: who is writing the works; how ethnic groups are portrayed in illustrations; whether stereotypes are employed; whether separate cultures are grouped together under such labels as "Hispanic" or "Asian"; how broad an ethnic selection of reading material is presented to children; and how long multiethnic literature remains in publication. As multiethnic literature is made more available, demand for it will increase. (A list of 44 references is attached.) (SG)

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF READING

Technical Report No. 551

MULTIETHNIC LITERATURE: HOLDING FAST TO DREAMS

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March 1992

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Abstract

The first part of this report surveys the past 25 years of the publishing of multiethnic literature--documenting trends and analyzing the content of the books that have been published. The second part surveys trade books and basal series currently used in schools for their inclusion of stories and illustrations featuring different ethnic groups. Finally, six issues are raised: the predominance of European-American authors writing about people of color, the ethnically nondistinctive child in illustrations, hypersensitivity, cultural grouping, the possibility of a canon of children's literature that includes multiethnic books, and the limited number of multiethnic books being published.

MULTIETHNIC LITERATURE: HOLDING FAST TO DREAMS

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.
-Langston Hughes

"Just look around this library. You don't ever see books about kids like us." (African-American fifth-grade girl)

"The whites get boards and boards throughout the year and we only get half a board in February." (African-American eighth-grade boy)

"You mean Martin Luther King was a Black dude?" (European-American sixth-grade boy)

Although these children's comments reflect the lack of children's literature by and about people of color, they also illustrate the importance of making such literature available to *all* children. In this report, I examine the existing research to determine how much and what kind of multiethnic literature for children is being published. I then report on an investigation I conducted of the books on three lists widely used by teachers and parents in selecting trade books for children and of the stories in two basal reading programs to determine the status of the multiethnic literature elementary school children are reading. I conclude with a discussion of several important issues raised in this investigation.

Multiethnic Children's Literature: How Much and What Kind

It has been more than 25 years since Nancy Larrick's article, "The All-White World of Children's Books," appeared in *Saturday Review*. The article, which focused on the shortage of African-American representation in children's literature, documented that of 5,200 children's books published from 1962 to 1964, only 349 (6.7%) included an African-American in the text or illustrations. Only 47 (0.9%) of the books published had African-Americans represented in contemporary settings.

Librarians had been decrying the lack of representation of people of color in children's books since the 1920s (Harris, 1990); Larrick's article was the first to bring the situation to a wider audience through the popular press.

In 1975, Chall, Radwin, French, and Hall (1975) replicated Larrick's study with books published from 1973 to 1975. Their intent was to document whether African-American representation had improved since the 1960s. They found that 689 (14.4%) of 4,775 books published included an African-American character in the illustration or text. This was a 100% increase over the 1964 statistic (although 85.6% of the books still included no African-American characters in their text or illustrations). Twenty-eight books (4% of the books published during those years) portrayed African-Americans in contemporary settings, double the percentage Larrick had found.

However, this increase was short-lived. In 1984, when Rollock updated her 1979 annotated bibliography entitled *The Black Experience in Children's Books*, she found that while over 2,000 new books had been published yearly for children between 1979 and 1984, only 100 new titles (1.5%) concerned the African-American experience. This was on average 25 new publications a year. In addition, many of the titles that had been listed in the 1979 edition were out of print by 1984. Rollock's 1984 edition was half the size of the 1979 edition, leading her to comment:

> The volumes of material on the African-American experience for children which were available in the late 1960s and early 1970s have dwindled to a trickle of titles by the same familiar authors. The social consciousness the Civil Rights Movement, once aroused, now seems dormant and has receded to the passive quiet of the years prior to the 1960s. (p. 4)

By the mid-1980s, only 1% of the children's literature published was about African-Americans; even less about Asian-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans (Bishop, 1987). According to the New York Public Library's *The Black Experience in Children's Literature* (1989), a bibliography of African-American literature, about 34 titles a year were published with African-American characters or illustrations between 1984 and 1988. A recent survey by Bishop (1991) indicates that currently, less than 2% of the 2,500 to 3,500 children's books published each year are about African-Americans.

As we entered the 1990s, Bishop (1991) was optimistic that despite the significant decrease in books about African-Americans in the 1980s, the numbers were rising again. In contrast, Hopkins (1990), an anthologizer of poetry for children, has argued that the situation is not improving dramatically:

> It is a fact: Eloise Greenfield is the only Black writer of children's poetry currently being published in the United States; her latest volume, *Nathaniel Talking* (Black Butterfly Children's Books) appeared in 1989.
>
> It seems quite incredible that, with over four thousand books for children being published annually, America is not seeing work produced by Black poets.
>
> It is disturbing that such work is not more visible or readily available to educators and children of all races.
>
> Poetry about the Black experience continues to dwindle. (p. 388)

Although quantity is a clear indicator of the status of multiethnic children's literature, it does not address the issue of what kind of literature is available for different ethnic groups. To get at that issue, I will look at what the research says about the content of books about African-Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, and Native Americans.

Children's Literature and the African-American Experience

In a 1975 study of African-American children's literature, Mills found that the major theme of the 24 picture books published during 1974 and 1975 tended to be love/understanding for others across races. Of these 24 books, 8 were folktales, and there was a wide range in length and subject matter in the fiction. In some of the books, the main characters were involved in child-like activities; in others, they were involved in gangs and violence. There was an unusually high number (24) of biographies of African-Americans for elementary school children, a welcome addition to the literature for that age group because they offered role models and a sense of identity. The 22 biographies published for older children did not provide the breadth of role models found in the biographies for younger children -- they were almost exclusively biographies about athletes.

Rollock (1984) noted a similar trend in the 1980s.

> The biography section features more accounts of athletes or sports figures. Their stories remain in print long after their playing . . . careers [have] ended, and they far outnumber biographies of Black scientists, artists, civic leaders and others who have contributed to society as a whole. (p. 4)

In her 1982 study of 150 realistic fiction books about African-Americans, Sims found that realistic fiction during the 1970s focused on:

> (1) the importance of warm and loving human relationships, especially within the family; (2) a sense of community among African-Americans; (3) African-American history, heritage, and culture; (4) a sense of continuity; and (5) the ability to survive, both physically and psychologically, in the face of overwhelming odds. (p. 560)

Bishop (1990, 1991) has noted both an increase in the amount of African-American literature being published and a shift in the content in recent years. She has found more African-American folktales, more picture books retelling family stories and family histories, more books for the very young with African-American characters, and more books that include people from the Caribbean. Biographies continue to be published in significant numbers. In addition to biographies of athletes, these books include folk heros, historical figures, and current political figures, such as John Henry, Martin Luther King, Paul Robeson, Jesse Jackson, and Malcolm X.

Children's Literature and the Hispanic Experience

Hispanic children's literature is complex to document because the term *Hispanic* does not refer to one culture but to a conglomerate of Central and South American cultures, each distinct from the others. Puerto Rican literature, for example, is not representative of Mexican-American literature, which is not representative of Salvadoran literature. For this reason, bibliographies tend to categorize books by country of origin (Nieto, 1982a, 1982b; Schon, 1980).

Analyzing the 100 children's books available about the Puerto Rican experience available in 1972, Nieto (1982a) found that all were "pervaded by sexism, racism, and ethnocentric colonialism" (p. 6). In addition, most of these books were written *about* Puerto Ricans, not *by* them. Of the 56 books about Puerto Ricans published between 1972 and 1982, Nieto recommended 8, she had reservations about 10 others, and the rest she considered to be seriously flawed. The primary theme of these books was assimilation into the culture of the United States. Though only one half of the Puerto Ricans living in the United States are in cities (primarily New York), most of the books were set in urban ghettos, the characters were frequently caricatures, there was no indication of physical diversity among Puerto Ricans, classism was pervasive, women were ignored, and Puerto Ricans were portrayed as helpless and passive and the cause of their own oppression.

Many of the books were retellings of folktales or stories from an author's childhood memories. The folktales, with the exception of the tales retold by Pura Belpre (e.g., *Perez and Martina*, 1960; *Dance of the Animals*, 1965), were often retold by someone who was not Puerto Rican. Poetry, which is often read or recited as an integral part of any Puerto Rican social occasion, is noticeably absent in Hispanic children's literature. In fact, books of Hispanic poetry are rare. In April 1989, Scholastic did publish a new book of Latin American songs and rhymes called *Arroz con Leche* (Delacre, 1989), and *Las Navidades* (Delacre, 1990) followed in 1990.

Books published from the mid-1980s to 1990 continued to center on large urban areas and focus on the author's childhood memories. Contemporary books about Mexican Americans are rare. Schon published a bibliography of notable books currently available on the Hispanic experience (1989). The list is short--15 non-fiction and 4 folktales or legends. The Hispanic population, though one of the

largest and fastest growing populations in the United States, continues to be poorly represented in children's literature.

Children's Literature and the Asian-American Experience

As with Hispanic culture, there is not one Asian-American culture. Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Taiwanese, Laotians, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Filipinos all have distinct cultures, traditions, and literary heritages. In the most recent comprehensive bibliography of Asian-American literature (Jenkins & Austin, 1987), each nationality is discussed separately, but in all traditions, the emphasis in children's literature has been on folktales, myths, and legends. Scott (1980) suggests that the reason for this might be that literature for children did not exist in Asian cultures until the nineteenth century. Before that, ancient and familiar stories were told by story tellers and usually intended for adults.

As with Hispanic literature, most of the tales are written *about* Asians rather than *by* Asians. In the past 10 years, there has been an increase in the number of books about the Asian experience in America, usually written by Asian-Americans about their own assimilation experiences or remembrances as children in the United States. Lord's *In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson* (1984), the story of a recent immigrant from China and her acculturation to life in the United States, and Uchida's *Journey Home* (1980), the story of a Japanese girl's experiences in California after returning from a concentration camp in which she had been held during World War II, are assimilation and childhood memories stories. With the exception of a few books such as *Ba-Nam* (Lee, 1987), the story of the traditions of Thanh-Minh Day when families visit their ancestor's graves in Vietnam, and *Tuan* (Boholm-Olsson, 1984), few books had appeared from Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian cultures by the end of the 1980s.

Children's Literature and the Native American Experience

Gilliland's (1980) bibliography of children's books on Native Americans repeats the common finding that although there is no shortage of books about Native Americans, there are very few books by Native Americans. She noted that many books about Native Americans use loaded vocabulary (e.g., *noble* and *savage*) and stereotypical characters. There were few examples of Native Americans that were not stereotyped in books for children (Lass-Woodfin, 1978).

Of the 800 titles listed in Stensland's *Literature By and About the American Indian* (1979), most are myths, legends, fiction, or biographies. Folktales and legends, the most frequent genre, are traditionally for adults and often written for older readers. Fiction tends to be predominantly about Navajos and is often written as if tribes were a people from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. In most of the fiction and biography, women are absent (Lass-Woodfin, 1978).

Many current books describe Indians participating in rituals and ceremonies. Although this portrays one aspect of Native American life, there are very few books that go beyond this to deal with other issues. Jamake Highwater[1] does go beyond. His writing deals with the spirit world that is an integral part of Native American life. *Anpao* (1977) is based in folklore but deals with connections to the earth, other humans, and the spirit world in a way that goes beyond the usual "folk-rituals" representation. Highwater's work is unusual--most of the books available about Native Americans continue to be folktales and legends.

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[1]Although his books do seem to deal authentically with aspects of Native American life, Jamake Highwater is the subject of some controversy because he is not of Native American descent. He maintains, however, that he has joined the Plains Indian tribe.

Related to the issue of the amount and kind of multiethnic literature being published is the issue of what cultural and ethnic views students are encountering in their elementary school reading. To address this issue, I undertook an investigation of the status of multiethnic literature in elementary schools. In the following section, I describe this investigation.

The Multiethnicity of Literature Used in Schools

For my investigation, I examined trade books and stories in basal reading programs that were appropriate for third-grade students. I focused on third-grade-level materials, because they tend to include a significant amount of meaningful text (a story, most often) along with the illustrations. I examined the appropriate books on three lists of trade books that are widely used by teachers and parents to select books for children: Jim Trelease's *The New Read Aloud Handbook* (1989 edition), the International Reading Association's Children's Choices Award book list (1989 edition), and the list of suggested books compiled in 1988 by former Secretary of Education William Bennett. I included the examination of stories from two basal reading programs because some researchers have proposed that basal reading program publishers may be more aware of the need to include a variety of literature by members of ethnic groups than are trade book publishing companies (V. J. Harris, personal communication, April 1989; P. D. Pearson, personal communication, February 1989). I chose the 1989 Houghton-Mifflin basal reading program, which is noted for using trade books as the basis for many of its stories (Durr, 1989a; 1989b), and the Economy basal program, which is based on a skills approach to reading instruction (Matteoni, Klein, Sucher, & Welch, 1989a; 1989b). I recorded the ethnic groups and races of the main characters in each story and tallied the race of all people in the illustrations.

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

None of the 20 stories I randomly sampled from the young- and middle-readers selections of the 1989 Children's Choices list had non-white main characters. There was also little variety in the ethnic representations in illustrations. Only one book, a story about rap music, contained illustrations of African-Americans. No other ethnic groups were represented in any of the stories (see Table 1). The books on Secretary Bennett's list also did not have characters of color. His third-grade list included many "classics" (which tend to be about whites) and few contemporary publications. (The idea of a canon of classic literature needs to be dealt with in this age of "cultural literacy," and I will return to this issue later in this report.) Jim Trelease's popular 1989 list included 51 books listed as appropriate for the third-grade level. Of the 44 books about people (as opposed to books about animals, space, and so forth), the main characters and illustrations of people in all were predominantly white.

There were 40 stories in the 3-1 and 3-2 literature-based readers published by Houghton-Mifflin. Six of these stories did not include any illustrations of people. Twelve stories included mixes of ethnic groups. All of the other stories in the program included representatives of a single ethnic group--African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, or Native American. The stories featuring whites contained representatives of several cultures (European, American, Canadian, Russian).

The skills-based Economy reader included 45 complete stories (9 of which were broken into a number of different lessons). The 40 stories with human characters contained a higher percentage of white characters (67%) than did the stories in the Houghton-Mifflin series (50%), and the Economy reader contained more folktales and stories from different eras of American history to vary the content/type of story.

These findings suggest that although basal reading program publishers appear to have made a concerted effort to include ethnic diversity in their stories, students are not seeing much cultural diversity in the trade books they read at school. These findings raise a number of issues. I address several of these in the next section.

Multiethnic Children's Literature: Some Issues

The first issue raised by this examination concerns the predominance of European-American authors writing about the experience of people of color. Sims (1984) argues that a European-American author will write from an "outsider's" point of view while an author of color will write from an "insider's" point of view. The difference in the perspective means there is a difference in what the authors say and how they say it; indeed, in their purpose for writing. Sims argues that European-American writers tend to want to socialize and assimilate children into the cultural mainstream--to bridge the minority and majority cultures--while writers of color want to socialize children into their own cultures, keeping distinctions between the majority and minority cultures alive. Whether authors want to subsume different cultures within a "national" culture or make distinctive aspects of each culture clear influences the literary choices authors make about what to say and how to say it.

The second issue raised, particularly in light of the issue of assimilation and cultural awareness, is that of clear ethnicity in illustrations. A number of basals have perfected the ethnically nondistinctive child--a child who is a mix of numerous races or ethnic groups rather than carrying the distinctive features of any one racial group--for their illustrations. In my analyses of basal readers, I found that the children in some of the illustrations were "unirace" children, as if the publishers were attempting to depict all people of color without addressing distinguishing differences.

The third issue is hypersensitivity. It seems important to engender sensitivity to other cultures without losing cultural richness that adds authenticity. A desire to avoid stereotyping can become an excuse to not deal with multiethnic literature--no book will be "pure" enough. Hypersensitivity can also lead to "watering down" or removing any cultural traits in literature which, in the end, seems to result in devaluing cultural diversity rather than valuing and celebrating it.

This issue came to the fore most powerfully in an undergraduate children's literature class I teach when I shared Jeanette Caines' *Just Us Women* (1982) with my students. This is a book I enjoy because of the warm relationship it depicts between a girl and her Aunt Martha who are going on a trip. The class (which happened to be composed entirely of European-American students) unanimously decided that this was not an appropriate book to use because Aunt Martha packed fried chicken for lunch and the girl wore her hair in braids. The students had missed the chance to vicariously experience a wonderful trip and a satisfying relationship--a pleasure we could all identify with and enjoy--because they worried about the stereotypes associated with eating fried chicken and having braided hair. My undergraduate students have also been wary about books that include dialect in the dialogue. Although it is appropriate to be sensitive to cultural issues and to forego books that do not deal with ethnicity in a tasteful manner, it should also be appropriate to enjoy cultural distinctiveness in the books we read.

A fourth issue is that of cultural grouping. There needs to be continued awareness about the tendency to make cultural conglomerates--"Hispanic" meaning any Mexican or Central American culture, or "Asian" meaning anything from Chinese to Japanese to Filipino. These cultures have great differences, and some authors do a disservice to learning about the cultures by treating them as though they were the same.

A fifth issue, alluded to earlier, is that of dealing with the canon of children's literature. The traditional canon, which includes white characters, contexts, and cultures, need not be eliminated, but broadened to include books by African-American, Asian-American, Hispanic, and Native American authors. Children need to be given a wide spectrum of choices of good quality literature for their reading. There is multiethnic literature such as *M. C. Higgins, the Great* (Hamilton, 1974) and *Dragonwings* (Yep, 1975) that is withstanding the test of time and is a part of the canon that should be available to all children.

The sixth issue is related to the publishing industry. Many of the culturally diverse books that are published go out of print rapidly (Rollock, 1984). Although mainstream publishers are publishing some multiethnic literature, the market is small and the number of authors and illustrators limited. One

publisher, Children's Book Press, has started printing traditional and contemporary stories that are told by a person native to the culture from which the story comes. *Baby Rattlesnake* (1989), for example, is told by Te Ata, a 92-year-old Chickasaw woman. Linda Mononey, herself part Indian, has adapted it for publishing. *Uncle Nacho's Hat* (Rohmer, 1989) is a tale from Nicaragua. Multiethnic stories must be told, written, and published before they can be a resource for students and teachers.

As the rich experiences available through multiethnic literature become a part of teachers' and students' lives, there will be a demand publishers cannot ignore. Then authors of color will be enticed to share their stories and to provide for our students a wealth and diversity of literature. To give our students dreams for the future, books that have characters and illustrations with which they can identify, we must work for a larger body of multiethnic literature. As Hopkins (1990) says:

> It is hard enough in the fledgling beginnings of the 1990s to "hold fast to dreams." If the dreams do not come--if the hopes, aspirations, thoughts, and feelings of Black American poets are not written about, how can any of us hold fast? Perhaps it is time to begin to ponder this loss--to call forward, aggressively nurture newer talents; to be concerned. (p. 388)

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Author Note

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Table 1

Ethnic Representation in Current Multicultural Literature
Grade 3

Book Source	Story Total	Main Characters						Illustrations					
		W	AfA	H	AsA	NA	Total	W	AFA	H	AsA	NA	Total
Houghton-Mifflin 1989	40 (6)	21	8	5	4	4	42	388	79	48	39	63	617
		50%	19%	11%	10%	10%		63%	13%	8%	6%	10%	
Economy 1988	45 (5)	20	20	2	1	4	30	235	52	15	17	21	340
		67%	10%	7%	3%	13%		69%	15%	5%	5%	6%	
Children's Choices 1989	20 (1)	13	-	-	-	-	13	959	65	-	-	7	1031
		100%	-	-	-	-		93%	6%	-	-	1%	
Bennett's List 1988	39 (5)	22	1	-	1	-	24	1946	43	-	99	93	2181
		92%	4%	-	4%	-		89%	2%	-	5%	4%	
Trelease Handbook 1989	51 (2)	39	3	-	1	1	44	2029	121	-	54	126	2330
		89%	7%	-	2%	2%		87%	5%	-	2%	6%	

( ) - Number of books in sample with animals as main character and in illustrations.

W - White
AfA - African-American
H - Hispanic
AsA - Asian-American
NA - Native American